



Matthew 3:13-17
A Very Different Christmas
The Son's Gift

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We are in an Advent and Christmas series of messages called, “A Very Different Christmas: What Are You Hoping For This Year?” and you can tell from this morning’s Scripture reading that it’s going to be a very different Christmas sermon series because you’ve probably never heard this passage read at Christmas. Jesus’ baptism was not an infant baptism, and it’s not usually read at this time of the year. So, as we saw last week, and you’ve seen in the accompanying book if you’ve read it (more are on the way, btw): in this series we are imagining that we are in heaven’s living room on Christmas day with God the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, exchanging gifts. That’s what makes it different. Last week we saw the gift that the Father gives to us is a baby, Jesus. It’s a gift that we need because it gives us clarity about who God is. We see the character of God in Jesus throughout his life.

Today we get to the gift that Jesus gives. His gift is to God the Father. And: **The gift that Jesus gives is righteousness.** As with last week, this is probably not a gift you’d think about giving or receiving at Christmas. But it is a gift that our Heavenly Father appreciates greatly. So before we go any further, we need to clarify what is meant by righteousness, because we might think of different things and this impacts our understanding of why the Father appreciates this gift that Jesus the Son gives. One of the things we might think of when we hear this word “righteousness” is the slacker surfer or ski-bum usage of the word “righteous”, as in “*dude...that’s totally righteous.*” In addition to the more Biblical understanding of the word, this is one that, for better or for worse, quickly comes to your pastor’s mind when I think of righteousness. That’s just me being honest: so as the sign out in front of the church providentially says this week: be slow to judge - ok? 😊

Or we might have a more distinctly negative feeling about the word because of the phrase “self-righteous.” When someone accuses you of being self-righteous, it’s not a compliment – it really is an accusation. And so we disassociate ourselves from it.

But as Christians, we don’t want to totally disassociate our selves from

this idea of righteousness, because it is what God looks for in our lives. It's not self-righteousness, and it's not surf- or ski-bum righteousness. It's a holy righteousness. It's a Godly righteousness. And it's what Jesus gives His Father at Christmas.

We have to go back to almost the very beginning of the Bible to get the context for this gift. Genesis 1:27 says, **“God created humankind in His image, in the image of God He created them; male and female he created them” (Genesis 1:27).** You and I are created in God's image. Not physically, but at the core essence of who we are. We are created to be image-bearers of God. Think about that for a moment. You are created to bear the image of God...to be a reflection – like a mirror – of God into the world: his character, his love, his creativity, his justice, his goodness, and so forth. When we live that way, we are living as God created us to live. It's the right way to live. Jesus had that same purpose; and unlike you and me and every other human who's walked the face of the earth, he lived it out flawlessly. He perfectly reflected the will and character of his Heavenly Father. This is Biblical righteousness.

“Righteousness” is why, when Jesus goes to the Jordan River to be baptized by John, Jesus insists that this needs to be done. John thinks it's backwards. *“I need to be baptized by you,”* he says. But Jesus says, *“Let it be so now; it is proper for us to do this to fulfill all righteousness”* (Matthew 3:15). Jesus is all about righteousness. So it's not that Jesus needed to be baptized for his own sake; he didn't need to be baptized. He did it because it fulfilled righteousness. It was a way of reflecting His Heavenly Father's character into the world and pleasing His Heavenly Father. It's the righteous and right thing to do.

And we see right there that **His Heavenly Father is pleased, as the Holy Spirit alights on him in the form of a dove and the voice from heaven rings out, saying “This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased.”** And then Jesus lived his life in perfect righteousness, in perfect reflection of His Heavenly Father. As Rico Tice writes in his book, *“At every moment he reflected God's image. At every point, he was perfectly righteous. In every second, he lived in a way that pleased his Father.”*ⁱ By the

way, wouldn't it be great if all children lived in a way that pleased their parents? Usually, they're more like the six-year-old boy who called his mother from his friend Charlie's house and confessed he had broken a lamp when he threw a football in their living room. "But, Mom," he said, brightening, "you don't have to worry about buying another one. Charlie's mother said it was irreplaceable."

Perhaps the most powerful example of Jesus' righteousness comes at the end of Jesus' life. He's been reflecting His Heavenly Father for his whole life, and encouraging others to do the same. He's set the bar quite high – telling people to love their enemies; to see all people as our neighbor – even those who are different than us...and then Jesus' neighbors and enemies arrested him, nailed him to a cross, mocked him, made fun of him...and what does he do? Does he call down fire and brimstone? Does he get into a verbal war with them and throw insults back? No. He does the righteous thing, the thing that would please His heavenly Father, that would reflect the character of God to the world. **He prays to His heavenly Father and says, "Father, forgive them."** He practiced what he preached, and he loved his enemies. He treated them like his neighbor. He reflected the heart of his Heavenly Father, and treated them like people who are also created in God's image, created to be image-bearers, even if they weren't acting like it in their treatment of Jesus.

We see throughout Scripture that God is pleased with Jesus' life. For instance, in what is known as the Transfiguration, an event in Jesus' life that Matthew, Mark, and Luke all record for us, Jesus' heavenly Father says, "This is my Son, whom I love; with Him I am well-pleased. Listen to Him." (Matthew 17:5). Very similar to his baptism and clearly, God is pleased with the righteous life that Jesus had lived thus far.

Also, Jesus' resurrection validates his righteousness as pleasing to his Heavenly Father. God was so pleased with Jesus that he raised him from the dead. If Jesus was a failure in pleasing His heavenly Father, why would he be raised back to life? And then lastly, Paul writes in Philippians, **"God exalted him [Jesus] to the highest place and gave him the name that is above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue acknowledge that**

Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father” (Philippians 2:9-11). So not only was Jesus raised back to life, but he was exalted, lifted up, in the heavenly realm both literally and metaphorically, and he’s the one to whom we bow and the one whom we acknowledge as Lord, because His Heavenly Father has said it should be so.

If Jesus weren’t doing the right thing...if Jesus weren’t living a life of righteousness that pleased his Heavenly Father, none of these things would have happened. So Jesus offers “righteousness” as his Christmas gift, and it is pleasing to His Heavenly Father. He is delighted to open this gift. Unfortunately, we have fallen short of that righteousness. We don’t reflect the character of God in the world. We may be made in God’s image, but frequently we don’t live like that at all. Jesus came and lived it perfectly, fulfilling God’s design for us and showing us what true righteousness – what true godliness, what truly reflecting the heart and character of God – looks like.

So: Righteousness is the gift that Jesus gives to His Heavenly Father. God is pleased with this gift and appreciates it greatly. But, there’s more to this gift that impacts you and me. Jesus’ gift is for His Father, but you and I are not completely left out of it, either. And to understand what that means for you and me...to understand what *you* could place under the Trinity’s Christmas tree in the heavenly living room and give to God...you’ll have to come back next Sunday. For now, however, just know that Jesus’ gift to his Father is righteousness, and it’s a gift that pleases him to no end. Let’s pray...Amen.

¹ Rico Tice, “A Very Different Christmas...” p. 21